19th Century American Literature.

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Walt Whitman.

1. Biography.
   1. Born May 31st, 1819, in West Hills, New York, the second of eight children. Whitman began working in newspaper offices at the age of 11 and wrote his first article at the age of 12.
   2. Lived in Brooklyn and later Manhattan and read many important writers of the day, including Emerson, Hawthorne, and Bryant. During this time he continued to write for newspapers and in 1842 published a novel about the evils of alcohol.
   3. Wrote political speeches and supported the anti-slavery campaigns of the day. Travelled to New Orleans in 1848 and saw the horrors of slavery with his own eyes. This experience affected him profoundly and changed his ideas about abolitionism.
   4. Shortly after he returned from New Orleans he began to work hard on a new form of poetry. He published the first edition of his life’s work, *Leaves of Grass*, in 1855. The poetry was unique in both its style and themes.
   5. Whitman’s poetry amounted to a revolution in literature. His poetry celebrated the body and the sexual nature of his poetry led to some problems. His publishers were even threatened with charges of obscenity on several occasions.
   6. For the rest of his life Whitman worked on this book, publishing nine different editions. The last, so-called “Death-bed Edition,” was published just two months before Whitman’s death in 1892.
   7. During the Civil War Whitman worked as a medical assistant helping injured and dying soldiers, first in New York and later in Washington D.C. At first excited by the work, he became weakened physically by the death he saw around him and was unhealthy thereafter.
   8. He saw himself as America’s “national bard (poet)” and worked hard to promote himself and his poetry. Although his poetry was not popular among the general public during his lifetime, many contemporary poets, writers, and critics recognized his importance.
   9. Emerson: Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote an essay titled “The Poet” that was a large part of Whitman’s awakening as a poet. He wrote: “I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil.” In this essay Emerson called for a poetry that would represent America: all people and all ideas, all of its landscape, and all of its qualities: good, bad, kind, evil, peaceful, and angry. Whitman heard this and started writing.
2. Themes.
   1. Controlling Ideas.
      1. Unity. In Whitman’s poetry “all things are one.” This is the single most important idea for understanding his poems: **all of the metaphors are interconnected**. Sex is democracy, the human body is the poem, the poem is America. All of these ideas can be interpreted through each other in the poems.
      2. Existence. Whitman’s is always asking the questions:
         1. “Who **am** I?”
         2. “Who **are** we?”
         3. “What **is** the world?”
         4. “What **is** a relationship between humans?”
      3. Contact. The best way to understand something (for Whitman) is to **touch it** (or kiss it, or eat it, or lay on it, or swim in it). He tries to understand the world through his senses and the most important sense for him is touch.
      4. The character **“I”**. In Whitman’s poetry there is always an I but this “I” is not meant to mean only the author. It is you and it is me and it is the nation and it is the world and it is the universe. This is a BIG “I”.
   2. Metaphorical Ideas.
      1. The Human Body. The human body is the most important thing in Whitman’s poetry for three reasons:
         1. It provides us with a unity with the world and others. “We are all the same.”
         2. It is a means of questioning the nature of existence and the source of all questions: the “who am I?” begins with “What am I?”
         3. It is the ultimate “I”.
         4. It provides us with a way of touching (contact), and therefore understanding, the world, society, and, most importantly, people around us.
      2. Sex.
         1. For someone who values the sense of touch over all others, it is no surprise that the act of sex is extremely important. It is impossible to touch or be touched more than during sex.
         2. It is also an extremely important metaphor in Whitman’s poetry. It represents the human experience in nature, in society, and in all relationships.
         3. Whitman’s sexuality is a source of great curiosity for anyone who studies him. He appears to have lived the way that he wrote. He was probably intimate with several men and at least two women.
      3. The Nation. “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” His grand them is the Unites States. This is the background for most of his other metaphor.
      4. Democracy. The idea of democracy perfectly lines up with Whitman’s views about people: we are all important, equal, and we only achieve our full potential by closely interacting with others around us. Whitman’s democracy was radical for its time: all individuals are equal: rich and poor, white and black, man and woman.
      5. Nature. The natural world is also a central metaphor in Whitman’s work. When he talks about nature he is not only talking about his body in nature (which he talks about a LOT), but this experience represents all of the other “Contacts” as well: the contact of sex, or democracy, or individuals in society are all represented in the poems by descriptions of contact with the earth.
3. Style.
   1. Free Verse. Whitman’s poetry does not have end rhyme or a standard meter. It is still complex and uses many different poetic devices (such as alliteration, anaphor, and internal rhyme). This freedom with the poetic form is meant to create the feeling of energy and freedom in the meaning of the poem and Whitman does this very well.
   2. Language: Whitman creates new words, uses words in a new way, and plays with sentence structure to create meaning. He also used language that is extremely shocking to some people. He talks about the human body and its functions in ways that can make some people uncomfortable. He is trying to get us to look at our body without shame.
   3. Catalogues. He writes long lists, attempting to capture everything he can think of on a give topic.
   4. Narrative Voice. This is the “I” we spoke of. The voice in his poetry is Whitman, but it is also you and me and everyone else and everything else at the same time.
   5. Revision: Whitman changed and revised his poems and the last publication is very different from the first edition. He meant that his poems would be looked at as a living and growing thing. It is often important to look at the changes he made and see how the changes affect the meaning of the poems.
4. Creative Writing Assignment
   1. Write a short poem in the style of Whitman’s “catalogue” technique.
      1. First go and sit in an interesting place with lots of people (for example, Seomyeon or Jagalchi Market). Sit and watch the people, take pictures, write notes, and make lists.
      2. Then, begin writing your catalogue of the people you see. Try to describe them as well as you can while using poetic language.
      3. Email me your poem and include some pictures of the people you described if you like.